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UNCLAS HANOI 000842

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STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL, AND DRL/IRF

STATE PASS TO US CIRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PGOV KIRF VM RELFREE

SUBJECT: The Prime Minister and Thich Huyen Quang

Ref: A. Hanoi 0809 B. Hanoi 0631 C. Hanoi 175

11. (U) Vietnamese media, including television on April 2 and all major newspapers including the Communist Party of Vietnam's flagstaff "Nhan Dan" and the military's "Quan Doi Nhan Dan" on April 3, gave prominent coverage to an April 2 meeting between Prime Minister Phan Van Khai and Thich ("Most Venerable") Huyen Quang, the patriarch of the pre-1975 United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). (Note: The UBCV is not recognized by the GVN and several of whose leaders -- including Thich Huyen Quang -- have been under house/pagoda arrest for many years. As noted in ref b, Thich Huyen Quang was allowed to come to Hanoi in March for medical treatment. End note)

12. (U) Media coverage of this apparently unprecedented senior-level meeting was one-sided. Thich Huyen Quang was not identified apart from his name and religious title; no reference was made to the UBCV or any prior or current leadership role played by him. His remarks to the Prime Minister were not covered in the media. Articles claimed that he had requested the meeting and the Prime Minister had "accepted" the request. (Note: According to Thich Huyen Quang himself -- ref a -- the Ministry of Public Security had "invited" him to remain in Hanoi for a few days because a senior leader wished to meet him. End note)

13. (U) According to media coverage, the Prime Minister described the CPV's and GVN's policy of religious freedom in Vietnam and urged Thich Huyen Quang to "participate actively in making contributions" toward national development and national solidarity.

14. (U) According to a press release from the International Buddhist Information Bureau in Paris (an often harsh critic of the SRV), Thich Huyen Quang spoke frankly about limitations on religious freedom in Vietnam during his meeting with the Prime Minister.

15. (U) Ambassador Burghardt will be meeting with Thich Huyen Quang in a previously scheduled appointment on April 4 and will have the opportunity to ask more about the background to this meeting, its contents, and Thich Huyen Quang's assessment of its implications for his own future and for the UBCV..

16. (SBU) Comment: However welcome this meeting and surprisingly extensive publicity are, Embassy does not believe that this treatment of the Patriarch presages a formal recognition of the UBCV or an end to harassment of its leaders and followers. Thich Huyen Quang himself, as of April 1, still expected to have to return to his "pagoda arrest" in Quang Ngai province shortly. The meeting may nonetheless reflect the GVN's growing recognition that its previous more hard-line attitude toward this elderly and still respected religious leader had only won the GVN decades of bad publicity and years of pressure from the USG and other international observers. GVN leaders may also have feared likely international condemnation had Thich Huyen Quang died in an isolated pagoda in the country without any GVN effort at reconciliation. The key will be to see whether there is any follow-on to what is so far pretty much of a one-time phenomenon.

17. (SBU ) Comment, continued: This attempt by the CPV and GVN to appear more positive toward religion in general is also in line with the CPV resolution on religion issued at the end of the second phase of the 9th CPV's seventh plenum in January (ref C). This resolution, whose full contents were released only in March, included many tributes to the role of religion (at least for a "small sector" of the public) and the right of religious belief (as well as of "non-belief"), while nonetheless coming down squarely in favor of greater supervision of religious bodies and the need for all religious believers to engage only in "legal" activities and to conform their international contacts with the foreign policy of the CPV and GVN.

BURGHARDT